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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MYSTIC'S EXPERIENCE

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The mystic experience is found in all races and religions. It claims attention as a non-rational, yet real, experience.

It may be defined as an immediate awareness of the nature of reality. The mystic feels a joyous certainty of the truth of his religious ideas.

The significance of the experience is not in its psycho-physical phenomena. The Orient knew long ago how to induce the experience by normal means.

Nor is its significance in its revelation of truth for no new truth is attained in the experience.

Its significance is that it gives emotional value to any world-view whatsoever and makes the individual unshakably certain of his worth and security in the system. Examples from monistic, theistic, and non-theistic mystics.

Each new world-view must develop its own mystics for mysticism tends to be a conservative force.

The mystic experience is known wherever baffled humanity has sought the meaning of the eternal mystery of life. It is a racial phenomenon and challenges attention as to its value, as an experience, without confusion with the specific theological or philosophical implications attached to it by the mystics themselves. With the development of psychological science, the reaction from other-worldliness and the steady effort to organize our understanding of the world of experience in scientific concepts, mysticism has fallen into neglect as a non-rational experience. But it is just as a non-rational, yet real, experience that it deserves consideration. Creative intelligence is really a late arrival in the cosmic drama. We have learned to appreciate how little intelligence has functioned in the long tragic ages of human history, to see the progress of the race as a blundering exfoliating of the will to live, to interpret the individual, human organism and the social complex of ideas, customs, and traditions, which

molds him, as alike the products of vast ages of suffering and striving, and to recognize the submerged realm of the unconscious as a potent factor in the shaping of life. We could afford to be more hospitable to the mystic experience. It is true that mysticism carries with it a vigorous support of its associated world-view. That is part of its significance. But mysticism is not a world-view. It is an experience and, as an experience, it has the same quality quite irrespective of its attendant religious ideas. The student of religious philosophies, wandering in the bypaths of the centuries, may be forgiven for renouncing the findings of the mystics so far as their interpretation of reality is concerned, for he sees that the religious philosophers themselves have only rationalized into cosmic proportions the ideas of historical religions achieved, not by reason, in the dimly lighted past. The mystic is not to be blamed if he fails to reach higher intellectual heights than those who claim to be intellectual, which is not his claim. His is an experience, which gives him a sense of peace, a quiet, glad at-homeness in the universe. He is no longer an alien, for in a moment of insight, he has seen the warm sunlight of familiarity light up the face of the Ineffable Mystery.

The experience may be defined in the broadest way as an immediate awareness of the nature of reality. It has the qualities of joy, peace, and security. In rare moments, when the play of the senses is subdued and conscious thought is stilled, the mystic experiences an immense extension of being, feels himself naturally, inevitably involved in a vaster existence, which is one with his own. He acquires an unshakable conviction that he has come face to face with the true nature of reality and carries the "sense of presence," "cosmic consciousness," or the feeling of "more" as an emotional glow into the daily routine of living. The mystic is sure that no words can describe his experience, yet a mystic's description is the best means of defining the nature of his vision. An

example, which is fairly typical, may be taken from a theosophical work.¹

There are moments, supreme and rare moments, that come to the life of the pure and spiritual . . . when the senses are tranquil, quiet and insensitive, when the mind is serene, calm and unchanging; when fixed in meditation the whole being is steady and nothing that is without may avail to disturb; when love has permeated every fibre, when devotion has illuminated, so that the whole is translucent; there is a silence and in the silence there is a sudden change; no words may tell it, no syllables may utter it, but the change is there. All limitations have fallen away. Every limit of every kind has vanished: as stars seen in boundless space, the self is in limitless life and knows no limit and realizes no bound: light in wisdom, consciousness of perfect light that knows no shadow and therefore knows not itself as light; when the thinker has become the knower: when all reason has vanished and wisdom has taken its place. Who shall say what it is save that it is bliss? Who shall try to utter that which is unutterable in mortal speech—but it is true and it exists.

This shows all the marks of the experience—ineffability, transiency, quiescence, the sense of immediate contact with reality, bliss, and complete assurance of truth.

Here, then, is an experience which challenges question on two points. Does it transcend explanation in terms of psychological science? Does it yield truth as to the nature of reality?

On the first point the answer is swift and confident. Modern psychology finds nothing mysterious in the phenomena of the experience. All the phases, from the milder sense of presence to the ecstatic trance, fit somewhere into the formulas of psychological science. The actual psycho-physical mechanism of the experience is sufficiently accounted for by the activity of the fringe of consciousness or the subconscious, by auto-suggestion or hypnosis, by sex-repression, by the effects of drugs, dancing, or anaesthesia, by unification of discordant

¹ *The Self and Its Sheaths*, p. 71, quoted by C. R. Jain.

elements of consciousness, or by the many phenomena of dissociation of personality. That modern science should explain the psychical conditions under which the ineffable vision comes does not disturb the mystic. A thousand years ago the Orient had worked out the normal method of producing the experience. It included strict control of the senses, repression of disturbing elements of thought, concentration of vision to induce hypnosis and meditation on a single thought. That the experience has a natural explanation may be taken for granted, but what of the truth immediately realized in the experience? That, for the mystic, is the important thing.

On this point Professor Pratt says:

But I think we may say at least this much: that while the psychology of religion must have a free hand, and while it is hopeless to look to it for a proof of anything transcendent, nothing that it can say should prevent the religious man, who wishes to be perfectly loyal to logic and loyal to truth, from seeing in his own spiritual experiences the genuine influence of a living God.¹

No genuine mystic ever needed such encouragement. It is the nature of the mystic experience to give an unshakable assurance of the truth realized in the vision. If he is a believer in God he will be convinced that God is and will be confirmed in his belief in him with a certainty that reason never could give. But here enters a difficulty. There are non-theists who are also mystics, and in their times of immediate awareness of reality they do not find God but a clear realization of the truth of their own already accepted world-view. So we find the answer to our second question. It has already been excellently stated by Professor Coe² and others. The mystic experience gives no new truth. The mystic comes from his intuitive contact with reality with just that truth which he took with him, namely, what he had accepted as true as a result of his training or of his social heritage. It is neither in its miraculous nature

¹ *The Religious Consciousness*, p. 458.

² "The Sources of the Mystic Revelation," *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. VI.

nor in its worth as a revelation of truth that the mystic experience has significance and value. In the Orient this was known long ago.

The central significance of the mystic experience is that it adds an emotional driving power, a glow of worth and enthusiasm to whatever religious interpretation of the world the mystic may adopt. A touch of mysticism, and the most coldly rational view of reality takes on life and interest. The confident assurance of being intimately united with the deepest reality gives a dignity and beauty to living and a wonderful spiritual exaltation which lights up the dreary, daily, commonplace facts of existence. While the mystic experience adds this reinforcement to any world-view its peculiar, psychic quality of unification, vastness, and infinity lends itself best to monistic interpretations. But since the self is always central, even impersonal or naturalistic monisms take on the feeling of personality. Tagore has pointed out that, while for the thinker ultimate reality is impersonal, for the religious worshiper it must always be experienced as personal. The theist will find the personal God in his mysticism. Although a religion may demand a personal God, the experience itself is one of unity, infinity, and eternity, with the result that in such writers as Ramanuja, Kabir, Tauler, and the Sufi poets there is a strange blend of the two types of expression. St. Teresa was even assured, in a moment of union, of the truth of the Trinitarian dogma. The more philosophical Vedantist finds only the impersonal Absolute and a confirmation of his *māyā* doctrine of the phenomenal world. In the *bhakti* types of Hinduism the predominant note is that of ecstatic union with a loving, personal God. But in all theisms the impersonal and personal are inextricably combined in the descriptions of the mystics. Kabir sings:

“When I am parted from my Beloved, my heart is full of misery: I have no comfort in the day. I have no sleep in the night. To whom shall I tell my sorrow?

The night is dark; the hours slip by. Because my Lord is absent, I start up and tremble with fear.

Kabir says: "Listen, my friend! There is no other satisfaction, save in the encounter with the Beloved."

But he also says:

"The river and its waves are one surf: where is the difference between the river and its waves?

"When the wave rises, it is the water; when it falls, it is the same water again. Tell me, Sir, where is the distinction?

"Because it has been named as wave shall it no longer be considered as water?

"Within the Supreme Brahma, the worlds are being told as beads:

"Look upon that rosary with eyes of wisdom."¹

Both the personal and the impersonal forms of expression fail to reach the full meaning. "Kabir says: It cannot be told by the words of the mouth. It cannot be written on paper. It is like a dumb person who tastes a sweet thing—how shall it be explained?"

It is only necessary to seek out the mystics of the various lands and religions to be convinced that any interpretation of reality may find support in this experience. Ramakrishna was able to achieve the mystic experience equally well in relation to Kālī, Krishna, Allah, and Christ, and so, to conclude that all religions are one and all are true. The experience is one and all mystics talk the same language.

The idealists of China who thought of reality as a monistic Tao unfolding in the phenomenal world-order may be represented by Chuang-tse.² Every mystic will understand him. "In tranquillity, in stillness, in the unconditioned, in inaction we find the levels of the universe, the very constitution of Tao." "Take no heed of time, nor of right or wrong. But passing into the realm of the Infinite, take your final rest therein" and so "we are embraced in the obliterating unity of God."

¹ *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, LII, XIV, LXXVI.

² *Chuang-tsu, Mystic, Moralist and Social Reformer*, pp. 191, 31, Giles translation.

Turn now to another type of world-view. India has had several non-theistic religions, and mystics in all of them. Here the center shifts from a Supreme Soul to the individual self as the ultimately real. The Sankhya philosopher teaches that souls are eternal and only by nescience are deluded into adopting as their own the experiences of the psycho-physical state of existence. In the mystic revelation the soul is convinced of its eternal isolation, breaks the bondage and escapes the tyranny of the world. Life is endurable with this insight. The Jains have always repudiated the idea of a supreme God as well as the monistic view of reality. Because mysticism has been associated in their thought with this dreamy monism they dislike being called mystics. They insist that a man must arrive at a clear understanding of the nature of reality by reason and then follow the mystic way to find the confirmation of the truth. "The real *yoga* for man is to know and realize his own divine nature and to establish himself in the beatific state of blessedness and bliss by subduing and mortifying the little, self-deluded, bodily self." The goal of *yoga* is "to establish the soul in the state of Sat-Chit-Ananda-ship."¹

As ignorance of the godly nature of the soul has been the cause of trouble in the past the change of belief in the right direction now must bring about the state of at-one-ment with the self. All the *yoga* that need be performed by the *jñāni* therefore consists in the unshakable conviction of the truth of the *Atman*, i.e., the soul, being the *Paramatman*, that is God. *Feel* this and you are free.

The *yogi* loves only the thrill of delight characteristic of wholeness and perfection. In the conscious enjoyment of real joy he finds it difficult to keep back the words "happy, happy. I am happy," which constantly rise to his lips. No royalty under the sun can lay claim to any such experience. The world reads, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" but it is the *yogi* who realizes and enjoys it. Men only vaguely talk of God but the *yogi* knows himself to be the enjoyer of the divine status and feels his own heart beating in harmony with the "divine heart." This is the very last stage of progress. When the aspirant gets established in this state he is said to have attained

¹ Jagadisha Chandra Chatterji, *The Hindu Realism*, pp. 150, 151.

to *samadhi* (i.e., the ecstatic trance). He has touched the summit of attainment and like a conqueror stands triumphant, his mind like a calm and boundless ocean spreading out in shoreless space holding the powers of life and death in his hand.¹

The Hindu school of the Nyāya-Vaisheshika is also non-theist and just as self-conscious in their use of the mystic experience. *Yoga*, they maintain, is not philosophy, but the means by which man may achieve "a direct knowledge or realization of what he has already learned by reasoning." So

He may realize all the facts and principles pertaining to the transcendental i.e., the supersensible and may finally realize *himself*, that is to say, the Atman, as separate from and independent of, everything else. When this is done he no longer feels that he is the body or the mind. With this realization all identification of himself in thought and desire with any specific form of existence ceases and the man is free.²

Exactly the same use of the mystic way is found in modern non-theistic Buddhism. The experience gives a complete and joyous conviction of the true nature of reality and of Nirvana. The training leads the Buddhist up to the concentrated state of mind.

His ultimate goal being still ahead, he makes his concentrated mind a powerful and effective means for the development of insight in order to fully realize the true nature of the world. Wherever he turns his eyes he sees naught but the Three Characteristics—Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta—standing out in bold relief. Nowhere, neither in heaven above nor in earth beneath does he find any genuine happiness, any reality, any fond object of desire to which he can cling. Whereupon he takes that one of the Three Characteristics which appeals to him most and intently keeps on developing his insight in that particular direction until one glorious day there comes to him, like a flash of lightning, the intuition of Nibbana—that "unshakable deliverance of the mind." Instantly he realizes that what was to be accomplished has been done; that the heavy burden of sorrow has been finally discarded. He now stands on those celestial heights with perfect *Sila*, mind fully controlled, far removed from the passions and defilements of the world, realizing the unutterable bliss of eternal deliverance.³

¹ C. R. Jain, *The Key of Knowledge*, pp. 383, 402.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 43², 475.

³ *The Buddhist Annual of Ceylon*, 1921. p. 28.

It would merely add examples to the monistic and theistic types of mysticism to follow Mahāyāna Buddhism through its Dharmakāya idealism and the faith-religion centered around Amitābha. All alike find assurance of the truth they believe.

During recent years in the West many have been forced to break with the old-world view of Christian philosophy. For some of these the mystic attitude has served to vitalize a new vision of reality. Edward Carpenter sees the doom of all the old religions and the sublimation of their values in a new religion of humanity. His is a social idealism in which the self is linked by innumerable bonds to the whole growing world and to all mankind. His mysticism has the glow of the Vedānta. He describes the vision.

Thus at last the Ego, the mortal, immortal self—disclosed at first in darkness and fear and ignorance in the growing babe—*finds its true identity*. For a long period it is baffled in trying to understand what it is. It goes through a vast experience. It is tormented by the sense of separation and alienation—alienation from other people and persecution by all the great powers and forces of the universe: and it is pursued by a sense of its own doom. Its doom truly is irrevocable. The hour of fulfilment approaches, the veil lifts and the soul beholds at last *its own true being*. . . . At last there comes a time when we recognise—or see that we shall have to recognise—an inner equality between ourselves and all others; not of course an external equality, for that would be absurd and impossible, but an inner and profound equality. And so we come again to the mystic root-conception of Democracy.¹

Under the strain of war H. G. Wells gave us an excellent example of the mystic assurance of the reality of the God he needed to have. He had long ago abandoned the Christian God. He had given up the hope of relationship with the “First Cause” of Ultimate Beginnings—the “Veiled Being.” Equally unsatisfying he found the Reality of which Mr. Shaw and M. Bergson can write with mystical fervor—the “Life Force.” His God must be finite, heroic, the synthesis of the highest human values, a “strongly marked and knowable

¹ *Pagan and Christian Creeds*, pp. 306, 308.

personality, loving, inspiring, and lovable." Mr. Wells does not need to "argue" about his God, for he has had the mystic moment of insight and so he "relates."

Suddenly, in His own time God comes. This cardinal experience is an undoubting, immediate sense of God. It is the attainment of an absolute certainty that one is not alone in oneself. It is as if one was touched at every point by a being akin to oneself, sympathetic, beyond measure wiser, steadfast and pure in aim. It is completer and more intimate but it is like standing side by side with and touching some one that we love very dearly and trust completely. "Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands and feet."¹

There can be no doubt of the value for life of this experience of complete assurance of the truth. It deserves to stand side by side with St. Teresa's words of assurance as to the reality of the Trinitarian God of whom Mr. Wells makes mock.

But how, you will repeat, *can* one have such certainty in respect to what one does not see? This question I am powerless to answer. These are secrets of God's omnipotence which it does not appertain to me to penetrate. All I know is that I tell the truth; and I shall never believe that any soul who does not possess this certainty has ever been really united to God.²

It is needless to multiply examples. Mr. Blood, pluralist and evolutionist, found in the anaesthetic revelation a clear realization of the "inevitable vortex of *Becoming*," an understanding of "the genius of Being" and a consciousness of the complete security of the self in the cosmic flow. A well-known scientist, who had had no religious experience but had from childhood been steadily devoted to natural science found the mystic experience in mountain climbing and, while clearly conscious of exhilarating life, felt his own being interpenetrate and become one with mountain, trees, and stones. This might easily be a mystic naturalism. But give the identically same experience a theistic turn and it becomes a consciousness of divine presence, as the literature of Christian and Indian mysticism abundantly proves.

¹ *God, the Invisible King*, p. 23.

² Quoted by William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 410.

The mystic experience, then, will justify any world-view and therefore can prove the truth of none. Our knowledge and understanding of the nature of reality must be secured in the full light of intelligence. When it is so achieved or accepted on authority, mysticism comes or, by proper technique may be induced, to light it up with beauty and give it emotional value and the conviction of certainty. We have seen that some religious groups develop the experience with this conscious purpose. But it is an essentially conservative force and each new religious world-view will have to develop its own mystics. It is at this point that the evolutionary naturalism of our Western science has failed. Some have carried over the old "sense of presence" into the new system of thought; some have found that it is only a step from the mystic "feel" of the old monistic idealism to that of the new humanism. But most religious people still feel that the world-view yielded by modern science is what Carlyle called it long ago—"a gospel of mud." And the anguish of suffering humanity as they gather the first-fruits of the age of machines is not reassuring. There is a deep sense of loneliness. If humanism is to have emotional driving power it must learn how to use our common human capacity for mystical feeling and mystical insight to give us the sense of deep-rooted security in cosmic development; to show us our affinity with the forms of life unfolding about us in the world of nature; to link us, by its clear vision, with our whole humanity in the bonds of mutual service and so, make possible that warm awareness of personal significance, worth, and responsibility in the shared life of the race.

The mystic attains this joyous certainty, that his own life is safely and inevitably bound up with the meaning of reality. The nature of the world-view does not matter. Spontaneously, or with the appropriate, controlled technique, the ineffable experience comes and, as with a fairy's wand, touches the structure of thought and suffuses it with "the light that never was on sea or land." In this emotional reinforcement lies the secret of its significance for religion and for life.